

Research Note

World Heritage Area listing of the Greater Blue Mountains – did it make a difference to visitation?

ABSTRACT

Effects of World Heritage listing on visitation to a given destination have been widely debated but little-researched, especially those areas listed for their natural values. In a study of the Greater Blue Mountains (Australia) we found that the majority of visitors were unaware that they had visited a World Heritage Area and, therefore, the status of the area had no effect on visitation for many. This was despite the majority of visitors being primarily motivated to visit the area for its natural beauty, and they were satisfied with their experience.

Keywords: national park, visitation, tourism trends, nature tourism, natural area management, WHA

1. Introduction and Background

The primary objective of UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) World Heritage listing is to preserve human cultural heritage and/or nature (UNESCO, 1992-2011). Host governments also often support such listing for their potential to enhance tourism. However, studies that support this view are limited, especially for areas listed for their natural values. Interpretation of research conclusions have also been challenged (Cellini, 2011; Yang & Lin, 2011).

Since the 19th century, the Blue Mountains, 70 km west of Australia's most populous city, Sydney, has been a popular nature-based tourism destination. In November 2000, this tourist destination was incorporated into the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area (GBMWhA), based predominantly on its natural values. This World Heritage Area (WHA) covers approximately 1,070,000 ha, encompasses eight reserved areas and, at least, segments of 12 local government areas (DECC, 2009). While 'nature' has been the major tourist attraction, visitation has declined in recent years. During 1999-2009, domestic overnight tourist visits fell (domestic, 45%; international, unchanged). Day visitors also declined during 1999-2004 by 59%. Despite subsequent partial recovery, in 2009 numbers remained 36% below 1999. World Heritage Area listing had no apparent effect on this declining trend (TRA, 2010).

Five years after gazettal, during the 2004-2005 austral summer, we surveyed visitors to the WHA to determine if its listing was a factor in their decision to visit the area, and evaluate the relative importance and satisfaction of their 'nature' experience.

2. Methodology

An English-language on-line questionnaire probed reasons for visitation, and sought to determine the role WHA listing contributed to the decision to visit (without prompting of WHA status). Notices/leaflets alerting visitors to the on-line questionnaire were distributed at six scenic lookouts near the most popular tourism village, Katoomba, the geographical centre of the WHA. Notices were posted throughout the study and leaflets were distributed between 0800-1800 hours once a month on Wednesday and Sunday during December 2004 - February 2005 (peak season). Results received before mid-April, 2005 are included as descriptive statistics or in pairwise Analysis of Variance.

3. Results and interpretation

The survey generated 164 responses (66% domestic, 34% international), in approximately equal distribution between day and overnight visitors.

Awareness of Australia's 15 UNESCO WHAs was generally low, with approximately half of respondents unable to name any (Table 1). . The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park was recalled most frequently (21.8% of all WHAs named, 51.2% named at least once) and the GBMWHAs was the second most commonly recorded (17.8% and 42.0% respectively). Less than half (49.5% domestic, 27.3% international) were aware that they had visited a WHA. Four years after listing, WHA status was, therefore, not a motivation for visiting the GBMWHAs for the majority of visitors.

Of the four destination attributes ('nature', 'heritage', 'art and culture' and 'indulgence and rejuvenation') identified as attractions to the GBMWHAs (SBM, 2006), nature had the highest mean 'importance' and 'satisfaction' rating among visitors. More than two-thirds of respondents reported this attribute as a 'very important' and a 'very satisfying' aspect of their visit (Table 2). However, even for this attribute, mean 'importance' and mean 'satisfaction' were not significantly different. The most important motivation for visiting the GBMWHAs

and, therefore, strategically the most important attribute of the visit, only met, but did not exceed, expectations. It has been shown that merely satisfying customers is unlikely to lead to customer loyalty (re-visit) or recommendation to others – exceeding expectations is required (e.g., Fournier & Glenmick, 1999; Kopalle & Lehmann, 2006). The other three attributes were of broadly equivalent importance (Table 2). Visitors scored these attributes significantly higher for ‘satisfaction’ than ‘importance’ (Heritage: $F = 38.1$, $_{1,313}$, $p < 0.01$; Arts and Culture: $F = 118.3$, $_{1,300}$, $p < 0.01$; Indulgence and Rejuvenation: $F = 43.7$, $_{1,312}$, $p < 0.01$). Despite this, mean satisfaction scores were moderate (range 3.2 – 3.6). This indicated that visitors were generally ambivalent about their experience.

4. Conclusions

Visitation to the GBMWhA declined between 1999 and 2004-2005 (our survey) and, therefore, appeared unaffected by WHA listing. Most were unaware they had visited a WHA. This was despite tourists being primarily motivated, and satisfied, by the destination’s natural beauty. These findings have implications for agencies seeking to benefit from WHA listing. At least in Australia, the ‘brand’ of ‘World Heritage Area’ has to be better enunciated to the consumer (tourist) before effect of consumer buying (visit) behaviour can be realised (Keller, 2008).

References

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Table 1: Percentage of Australian World Heritage Areas recalled by respondents (%) who had visited the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area; data from on-line survey, December 2004 - February 2005. Percent of all named (% named at least once).

<i>World Heritage Area named</i>	<i>Visitors</i>
Great Barrier Reef	21.8 (51.2)
Greater Blue Mountains	17.8 (42.0)
Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park	16.5 (38.9)
Kakadu National Park	14.2 (33.3)
Tasmanian Wilderness	12.1 (28.4)
Wet Tropics	6.0 (14.2)
Fraser Island	4.5 (10.5)
Gondwana Rainforests	2.9 (6.8)
Lord Howe Island	1.3 (3.1)
Shark Bay	1.6 (3.7)
Macquarie Island	0.5 (1.2)
Purnululu National Park	0.5 (1.2)
Willandra Lakes Region	0.3 (0.6)
Heard and McDonald Islands	0.0 (0.0)
Australian Fossil Sites	0.0 (0.0)

Table 2: Visitor stated 'importance of' and 'satisfaction with' Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area attributes; data from on-line survey, December 2004 - February 2005.

Importance (Satisfaction)					
Percent		Nature	Heritage	Arts & Culture	Indulgence & Rejuvenation
Very important (very satisfied) 5	75.6 (63.0)	10.4 (16.6)	4.3 (13.7)	15.9 (25.3)	
4	11.5 (27.8)	14.6 (21.2)	5.5 (10.1)	15.2 (20.7)	
3	4.2 (6.8)	27.4 (53.0)	19.0 (64.7)	18.9 (44.0)	
2	1.2 (0.6)	23.8 (6.6)	23.3 (9.4)	20.7 (9.3)	
Very unimportant (very unsatisfied) 1	7.3 (1.9)	23.8 (2.6)	47.9 (2.2)	29.3 (0.7)	
Mean (standard deviation)					
Importance	4.5 (1.1)	2.6 (1.3)	2.0 (1.1)	2.7 (1.4)	
Satisfaction	4.5 (0.8)	3.4 (0.9)	3.2 (0.9)	3.6 (1.0)	